DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 417 301 CE 075 999

AUTHOR	Sabatini, John
TITLE	A Case Study Perspective on Policy and Practice in Adult Learning.
INSTITUTION	National Center on Adult Literacy, Philadelphia, PA.
PUB DATE	1997-00-00
NOTE	5p.
PUB TYPE	Journal Articles (080) -- Reports - Research (143)
JOURNAL CIT	NCAL Connections; p1-4 Fall 1997
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Adult Basic Education; *Adult Literacy; Case Studies; *Educational Needs; *Educational Philosophy; Educational Trends; *Literacy Education; *Outcomes of Education; Student Motivation

ABSTRACT

A case study was made of the participation and results of participation in an adult basic education (ABE) class by an African American student in her mid-40s. The woman had been a janitor and was promoted to supervisor of 17 custodial employees in building management. She attended ABE classes for 3 years. During this time, she advanced through several levels of the Learning Unlimited Program. She was especially good in reading, and had some skills in writing; she struggled more in mathematics. She worked hard in class and seemed to enjoy being there. Her supervisor reported that her skills and self-esteem had improved. Toward the end of the 3 years, however, as a result of the strain associated with maintaining a full-time job, raising a child, and personal problems, the woman stopped attending the literacy classes. Despite her previous good attendance, she had not made enough progress to go on to a high school equivalency program, nor had she incorporated all the literacy skills she had learned into daily life. It was thought that she might have been helped more by a more contextual and less skill-based curriculum, if such a program had been available. Case studies such as this can be used to evaluate literacy education efforts and make appropriate policy reforms. (KC)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

NCAL Connections
NATIONAL CENTER ON ADULT LITERACY
UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA
FALL 1997

ED 417 301

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

A Case Study Perspective on Policy and Practice in Adult Learning*

by John Sabatini

Introduction

Adult basic education (ABE) in the United States is a patchwork of federal, state, and local programs, aimed toward helping individuals and families acquire the skills they need to obtain and hold remunerative jobs, manage their homes, and participate fully in community and civic affairs. National surveys such as the National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS; Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins, & Kolstad, 1993) and the National Evaluation of Adult Education Programs (NEAEP; Development Associates, Inc., 1992, 1993), along with others on a smaller scale, offer one set of perspectives on a highly complex and distributed educational system that, unlike the elementary/secondary system, lacks a substantial infrastructure.

For policy formation, however, these data are incomplete. They do not reveal how policy is transformed into practice. That transformation is, in part, determined by the conditions under which adult literacy programs operate, the characteristics of those adults who attend, and the manner in which students encounter instruction. What policies might induce more adults in need to attend programs, improve the efficiency of instruction and its outcomes, or better serve the needs of families and employers cannot be determined from these survey results. One needed complement to the available data is a perspective from the side of the learner and the instructor. The case history reported here provides that perspective. It originates in a Case Study Group, composed of adult literacy instructors, researchers, and graduate students, that met monthly in northern Delaware from April 1993 until June 1994.

In the case described in this article, learning issues comprise the core of the discussion. Information about the individual's home, work, and personal situation is offered when it is relevant to teaching and learning. The author has tried not to stress this side of the adult literacy story, however, because it can too easily obscure all other aspects of the students' activities. That is, although the researchers are dealing with human beings who, in some cases, have difficult challenges in their personal lives, the goal is to discover how much they learned from adult literacy instruction and why. The style of this case history falls somewhere between that used by Monroe (1928) and that used by both Johnston (1985) and the Center for Literacy Studies (1992). Although there is interest in both diagnosis and remediation (as in the former collection) and in the affective aspects of reading failure (as in the latter two), the researchers are also concerned with classroom procedures, with resource allocation, and with policy issues.

If there is a principle that has guided the development of this written case, then it is one that derives from a diagnostic and remediation instructional model, and a learning context in which instructional

* This article is excerpted from NCAL technical report TR96-07.

(continued on page 21)

John Sabatini is a Senior Research Associate at the National Center on Adult Literacy.

CE 075 995

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Case Study...

(continued from page 7)

goals are the central focus. By concentrating on these aspects, the authors of the study do not mean to ignore the importance of issues like student anxiety, attributions, self-confidence, and motivation. All of these must be attended to in an effective learning environment, and many are discussed in the case presented, but they are not seen as the goals of adult basic education. Stated differently, the perspective is that most adults can learn basic reading, writing, and mathematics, regardless of their entry level abilities, and that classes exist to achieve these goals. There should be little satisfaction, therefore, in a situation where, after a year or more of instruction, the only tangible change is a purported increase in self-confidence by the learner or a more positive attitude toward literacy. Significant improvements in learning as a result of adult literacy instruction, however, are difficult to find (Venezky, Bristow, & Sabatini, 1993).

Case study: Ms. A

At the beginning of this study, Ms. A represented the positive reality of adult literacy instruction. A healthy, African American woman in her mid-forties, she was employed full-time as a supervisor and building manager of 17 custodial workers. She had recently been promoted from janitor, and she enjoyed strong support from her supervisor, coworkers, family, and friends for furthering her education. In a company newsletter dated July 1993, Ms. A's supervisor wrote about her: "She has been enrolled in night courses for over two years and has not only gained the knowledge associated with schooling, but her self-esteem, self-confidence, and overall outlook on life has [sic] improved." Ms. A wrote in a class writing exercise, "My attitude in the past towards education was very poor, but I have reached a point in my life when I'm looking forward to continuing my education." Enrollment in an ABE class was a first step toward her long-term goal, completion of a high school diploma or a GED certificate.

Background

Ms. A left school in the 10th grade, at the same time that she decided to move out of her home and lead an independent life. She now has a 12-year-old daughter. Her literacy habits appear to be in transition. On one hand, she says she likes to read and always has, but she is an occasional, not a regular, reader. For book and magazine reading, she prefers the Bible and *Reader's Digest*. Newspaper reading is more regular, but is limited primarily to the obituaries and local events.

Literacy program

The evening ABE class that Ms. A attends meets in the YMCA of a medium size urban area for two hours on each of two weeknights. The instructor has been teaching adult education classes since 1978. He holds a BS in psychology and an MS in counseling psychology. (Ten or fewer students attend any given session.) Although each student works at his or her level and concentrates on the skills most needed, all derive their skill work from an individual skills prescription program called Learning Unlimited, which has mastery tests and workbooks.*

When students come to class, they check their personal folders or check with the instructor to find out what specific workbook tasks or mastery tests they are assigned. When a workbook exercise or mastery test is completed, it is brought to the instructor who grades it, while the student observes, and gives suggestions for doing the items that were worked incorrectly. Results are placed in the student's file. Sometimes, more practice is recommended. Mastery tests usually consist of 10 to 15 short-answer or multiple-choice items, all similar to those in the workbook.

If the student passes a mastery test, he or she can proceed to the next objective. If not, more practice is usually prescribed. Mastery tests are not timed and may be started at the end of one class and completed at the end of another. Within the complete Learning Unlimited Program, skills are grouped by level (A, B, C, etc.), and within level by skill domain (e.g., decoding, literal comprehension, whole number operations, problem solving). Each level also has a diagnostic test that is used to decide which skills need to be worked on and retested. At Level B, where Ms. A was work-

(continued on next page)

** Learning Unlimited is required by the State Office of Adult Education for individualized skill instruction and is, therefore, used in the majority of state-funded programs. Since it was used in all of the programs reported on here, and was the only complete program in use, it comes under considerable scrutiny in this article. The author does not intend, however, that any of these comments, positive or negative, be taken as conclusive evaluations of the program. The concern is only with the appropriateness of the program for the specific cases reported here and not with its merits relative to other available programs.*

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

ing in the early spring of 1992, decoding has 9 subskills or objectives: structural analysis, 6; vocabulary, 1; literal comprehension, 3; paragraph writing, 1; numbers and numeration, 3; whole number operations, 23; and problem solving, 2.

Although students work independently in the class, there is an air of camaraderie and purpose in the room. Students greet each other upon entering class, conversations within class are spoken in a normal voice, and most students work steadily from entry to exit without a break. Some of the more outgoing students, like Ms. A, may make comments to the entire class during an evening; most, however, work quietly. The instructor exhibits great patience, working with students one at a time, trying to reach everyone in an evening session.

Skill learning

Ms. A's reading skills were above average for adults returning for ABE instruction. Her oral reading was generally fluent and her recognition vocabulary was good. According to the Learning Unlimited Mastery Tests (Level B), she knew the basic phonics elements (consonants, blends, digraphs, etc.), but not some of the word-based skills (affixed words, possessive nouns, and syllables). She also failed to master two of the three subtests for literal comprehension at this level (details and following directions). It is difficult to determine, however, how much of her difficulty derived from the testing paradigms used and how much from the skill content.

In contrast, her writing is replete with logical and grammatical error—over and above omissions and verb usages that may derive from Black dialect (e.g., "you be doing a good job," "some crimes may not been helped"). Her punctuation is erratic, especially commas. She shows little evidence, furthermore, of self-editing. The overall impression of her writing, however, is that, with frequent writing and rewriting, significant improvements would occur. Ideas are usually expressed clearly, paragraphs usually start with strong topic sentences, and personal letters end with appropriate concluding sentences. Composition needs improvement, nevertheless, as does coherence.

Mathematics has been the most challenging area for Ms. A, and her progress has been slow although she spends the majority of her class time on this subject. Her instructor's notes for February and early March 1994 mentioned general concentration problems as well as difficulties with specific tasks such as borrowing in subtraction. Verbal instructions and procedures seemed to help her the most; when she could rehearse a list of steps and then practice them by herself, she seemed not only to do her best work but also to show the most confidence in her own abilities.

Beginning at the end of March and continuing through spring and summer, Ms. A began to experience health problems and unspecified other problems at home. From the end of March until the 22nd of June, when she decided to drop out of the class, she attending only 5 of 15 class sessions. On May 20, her instructor noted that she "seems to be losing steam, which may be as a result of personal problems at home. This is part of the reason for most of her absences."

Further clouding the positive picture that was presented at the beginning of this vignette was a sense that, on the one hand, Ms. A was feeling that she wasn't progressing fast enough toward her goals, but, on the other hand, she appeared unwilling to consider advancing to adult high school classes. The latter attitude is discussed by her instructor in a journal entry of March 28: "Discussed eventually moving to [XXX] High School. She wanted to stay where she is. My feeling is that [Ms. A], and a number of other students become so complacent...in this type of setting they fear the thought of leaving." How much of this feeling of lack of sufficient progress was a result of the personal problems she was suffering at the time and how much was a result of the continual struggle with mathematics and writing cannot be determined from the available evidence.

Surprisingly, throughout the period when her attendance was so spotty, when she did come to class, she tended to work hard, and she did manage to pass several Learning Unlimited mastery tests, particularly in reading skills. In mathematics and writing she continued to struggle, although some bright spots were recorded. However, after the preceding class (May 9), it was recorded that she "has difficulty putting her thoughts accurately on paper....Progress is being made slowly. She needs to continue to write more. She tends to dread this activity due to her awareness that it takes time." In mathematics, her work was even less rewarding.

Conclusions

In retrospect, there are two sides to Ms. A's story. On one hand, she managed to attend an ABE program regularly for almost three years, and progressed across several levels of the Learning Unlimited skills program. Her literacy habits outside of class were increasing. Her supervisor observed a positive change in her self-esteem and self-confidence. Yet, she has not reached her goal of completing her high school education or obtaining a GED certificate, and her continuation in the ABE program is in doubt. Conflicts at home and the effects of full work days, at least on the surface, were draining whatever energy she had; learning progress was being made ever more slowly.

One might also question whether or not a skills-based program was the best prescription for Ms. A. The language-arts exercises seldom gave her any challenge, but her performance level in reading was far above the basic-skills level, and she probably would have benefited more from holistic tasks. Particularly in writing, she needed more practice in composing longer works (letters, reports, short essays, etc.). She also needed to learn how to proof her own work and to do second and third drafts. At several points, her instructor did suggest that she keep a journal, but there is no evidence that she ever did this. His other attempts to encourage her to write more also failed.

Only in mathematics was skill practice clearly needed, but, even here, more applied problems might have led to higher motivation to learn. Perhaps her abilities in reading could have been used to advance her mathematics and writing. Giving her contextualized, applied tasks may have helped her not only with these areas but also with moving toward more self-directed learning. One of the biggest dangers of strict skills-based programs for adults is that they seldom encourage independent learning and teach few, if any, study skills.

These concerns about skill-based programs are mostly speculations, however, and they assume the availability of curricular materials, diagnostic testing, and instructor time that were not available in Ms. A's

(continued on page 4)

Ms. A enrolled in the fall of 1992 in the same program she had been attending, but she continued to have problems with her health as well as family problems, and her attendance was extremely limited. From October 1992 until the middle of January 1993, she attended fewer than three classes.

Case Study...

(continued from page 3)

class. There is no guarantee, furthermore, that had a more functional context course been selected, Ms. A would still be attending regularly or making faster progress.

Adult literacy programs are not entitlements, nor are they social support systems, nor are they the leading edge of a national lifelong learning program. They are funded to provide the basic educational skills required for successful integration into modern society. To achieve this mission, they need to be structured in a manner conducive to adult learning. Support services are also required to alleviate a variety of barriers to full participation by the target population, such as transportation and childcare assistance, job counseling, and vision and hearing screening. But programs must also be educationally sound if they are to succeed, and it is doubtful that very many programs will meet the expectations of their sponsors when critical educational decisions are primarily made by the participants rather than the instructors and administrators. In the translation of legislation into policy, and policy into practice, adult literacy programs in the United States may have strayed from the most direct route to learning achievement. ○

References

Center for Literacy Studies. (1992). *Life at the margins: Profiles of adults with low literacy skills* (Contractor Report). Knoxville: University of Tennessee, Center for Literacy Studies.

Development Associates, Inc. (1992). *Profiles of service providers* (First interim report). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

Development Associates, Inc. (1993). *Profiles of client characteristics* (Second interim report). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

Johnston, P.H. (1985). Understanding reading disability: A case study approach. *Harvard Educational Review*, 55, 153-177.

Kirsch, I.S., Jungeblut, A., Jenkins, L., & Kolstad, A. (1993). *Adult literacy in America: A first look at the results of the National Adult Literacy Survey*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics.

Monroe, M. (1928). Methods for diagnosis and treatment of cases of reading disability. *Genetic Psychology Monographs*, IV(4 and 5).

Venezky, R.L., Bristow, P.S., & Sabatini, J.P. (1993). Measuring change in adult literacy programs: Enduring issues and a few answers. *Educational Assessment*, 2(2), 101-131.

Copyright © 1997
National Center on Adult Literacy
NCAL is part of the Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania

Direct inquiries to:
Dissemination
National Center on Adult Literacy
University of Pennsylvania
3910 Chestnut St.
Philadelphia, PA 19104-3111
tel. (215) 898-2100; fax (215) 898-9804
Internet e-mail: ncal@literacy.upenn.edu

Daniel A. Wagner, Director
Mary O. Russell, Assistant Director
Janet C. Smith, Editor
Christopher Hopey, Senior Researcher
Lynda Ginsburg, Senior Researcher
John Sabatini, Senior Researcher
Steve Lutzeyer, Programmer

The University of Pennsylvania values diversity and seeks talented students, faculty, and staff from diverse backgrounds. The University of Pennsylvania does not discriminate on the basis of race, sex, sexual orientation, religion, color, national or ethnic origin, age, disability, or status as a Vietnam Era Veteran or disabled veteran in the administration of educational policies, programs, or activities; admissions policies, scholarship and loan awards, athletic, or other University administered programs or employment. Questions or complaints regarding this policy should be directed to the Executive Director, Office of Affirmative Action, 133 Blockley Hall, Philadelphia, PA 19104-6021 or (215) 898-6993 (Voice) or (215) 898-7803 (TDD).

BEST COPY AVAILABLE